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ON WORLD AIDS DAY, FLORIDA HEALTH IN OKALOOSA CONTINUES FIGHT AGAINST HIV/AIDS



Contact: Ryan Mims
HealthyOkaloosaPIO@flhealth.gov
Media Line: 850-344-0580

Ft. Walton Beach, Fla. — Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County (DOH-Okaloosa) unites with people and communities worldwide as we observe World AIDS Day by showing support for people living with HIV and honoring those who have died from an AIDS-related illness. This year's national theme is "Increasing Impact Through Transparency, Accountability, and Partnerships."

"HIV is still a public health concern, and we encourage everyone between the ages of 13 and 64 to get tested for HIV at least once as part of routine health care," stated Dr. Karen A. Chapman, Director of DOH-Okaloosa. "Knowing your HIV status gives you powerful information to help you take steps to keep you healthy."

Over 1.1 million people in the US are living with HIV, and 1 in 7 of them don't know it. The department remains fully committed to fighting the spread of HIV in Florida and helping connect individuals who are positive with lifesaving treatment and services.

Florida is a national leader in HIV testing. DOH and our partners throughout Florida have made great strides in prevention, identifying infections early and getting people into treatment, however there is still much work to be done. The department is focusing on four key strategies to make an even greater impact on reducing HIV rates in Florida and getting to zero, including:

- Routine screening for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and implementation of CDC testing guidelines;
- Increased testing among high-risk populations and providing immediate access to treatment as well as re-engaging HIV positive persons into the care system, with the ultimate goal of getting HIV positive persons to an undetectable viral load;
- The use of PrEP and nPEP as prevention strategies to reduce the risk of contracting HIV; and
- Increased community outreach and awareness about HIV, high-risk behaviors, the importance of knowing one's status and if positive, quickly accessing and staying in treatment.

With early diagnosis, individuals can begin appropriate treatment and care resulting in better health outcomes. Studies have shown that providing antiretroviral therapy as early as possible after diagnosis improves a patient's health, reduces transmission and can eventually lead to undetectable viral loads of HIV. This model has been successfully implemented in Florida and there are currently 35 Test and Treat sites operating statewide.

As part of our strategic efforts to eliminate HIV in Florida, the Department of Health is currently working to make Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) medication available at no cost at all of the 67 county health departments within the next year. PrEP is a once-daily pill that can reduce the risk of acquiring HIV in HIV-negative individuals. **PrEP should be used in conjunction with other prevention methods like condoms to reduce the risk of infection.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), taking PrEP daily reduces the risk of getting HIV by more than 90 percent.

DOH-Okaloosa offers PrEP to individuals that are at high risk of HIV. Individuals can contact DOH-Okaloosa at 850-833-9246 to make an appointment for an HIV test and PrEP consultation.

In October 2017, DOH-Okaloosa launched a new mobile community-based HIV testing initiative to help make testing available to Okaloosa and Walton county residents. DOH-Okaloosa is partnering with locations throughout Okaloosa and Walton counties to host HIV testing. For World AIDS Day, DOH-Okaloosa will be providing free and confidential HIV testing at Carver Hill School Center in Crestview, Florida on December 1 from 8:00 a.m. until noon. To arrange HIV testing at your location, businesses, churches and community organizations can contact Aaron Hill at 850-428-0205.

DOH-Okaloosa offers free high-quality HIV testing services during regular business hours at their clinic office. For the DOH-Okaloosa Clinic hours of operation or for more information, visit www.HealthyOkaloosa.com.

For other information on HIV, call the Florida AIDS Hotline at 1-800-FLA-AIDS or 1-800-352-2437; En Espanol, 1-800-545-SIDA; In Creole, 1-800-AIDS-101.

About the Florida Department of Health

The department, nationally accredited by the [Public Health Accreditation Board](#), works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.

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